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THE INDIVIDUALIZED APPROACH TO READING INSTRUCTION--KEY CONCEPTS.

BY- NEWMAN, ROBERT E.

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A DETAILED OUTLINE OF KEY INDIVIDUALIZED READING PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES FOR THEIR APPLICATION TO SUBURBAN AND INNER-CITY SITUATIONS ARE PRESENTED. THE APPROACH IS SUGGESTED FOR GRADED, TEAM-TAUGHT, OR SELF-CONTAINED CLASSROOM GROUPINGS IN THE TOTAL ELEMENTARY READING CURRICULUM. TWO INTERDEPENDENT PRINCIPLES RECOMMEND THAT THE CHILD BE HELPED TO BE ON HIS OWN TO DEVELOP AT HIS OWN PACE TOWARD SKILLFUL AND INDEPENDENT LEARNING AND THINKING AND THAT THERE BE A TWO-WAY INSTRUCTIONAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEACHER AND PUPIL. TEN GUIDELINES ARE OFFERED FOR IMPLEMENTING THESE PRINCIPLES DURING THE DEPENDENT PHASE, THE EARLY INDEPENDENT PHASE, AND THE INDEPENDENT PHASE DURING WHICH THE CHILD LEARNS TO THINK REFLECTIVELY. A DETAILED ACCOUNT OF "THE RIVERVIEW SCHOOL STORY" IS RELATED AS AN EXAMPLE OF THE APPLICATION OF THE PRINCIPLES PRESENTED. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE (SEATTLE, MAY 4-6, 1967). (NC)

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Robert E. Newman
Associate Professor
Syracuse University
Syracuse, New York 13210
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THE INDIVIDUALIZED APPROACH TO READING INSTRUCTION: KEY CONCEPTS

(To be presented in A Decade of Innovations: Approaches to Beginning Reading, Section b, "Individualizing Beginning Reading Instruction," IRA, Seattle, May, 1967.)

Individualized reading is not a system or a method. It is a broad gauge approach to learning to read and learning with reading which grew out of a grassroots teachers' dissent from some American pedagogical orthodoxies such as lock-step doctrinaire use of basal reader systems--a dissent expressing concern for the release and development of responsible independence and the ability to think for oneself. The individualized approach is based on certain principles of education which are intended to translate the underlying philosophical orientation into guidelines for classroom and schoolwide educational programs in reading and related language arts, social studies, and science. Within these guidelines educators must make decisions regarding a particular reading program's grouping, classroom practices, evaluation procedures, content, books, and materials. The guidelines also suggest certain standards for teacher adequacy which are different from most teachers' training, clearly implying the necessity for in-service training.

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Part II of this paper summarizes the key principles and resultant guidelines which delimit the individualized approach to reading. Part I, "The Riverview School Story," describes an illustrative primary grades reading program which fits within these guidelines.

PART I: The Riverview School Story

"The Riverview School Story" tells how an inner-city school worked within the theoretical guidelines, which we are calling the individualized reading approach, to meet a problem which threatened to undermine the school, by first moving to change reading instruction in the primary grades. The story is descriptive of a situation which is partly real and is partly a description of what could happen.

* * * * *

Riverview School is a 700 pupil K-6 elementary school located in a Pennsylvania steel mill town of 174,000. It used to be in the town's "best" neighborhood--the Upper Maple Street area--which boasted of the community's lone cultural landmark, Simmons College, a liberal arts school of 1900 students. Now this is changed. Upper Maple Street is now within the fringe of the town's predominately Negro slum. Nowadays most townspeople would acknowledge that Riverview School is located in the town's "second worst" neighborhood.

But what was this doing to Riverview School? Four years ago, Miss Burns, Riverview's principal, decided she had to make some fundamental changes to adapt Riverview to its new school population mix and its new neighborhood climate. She saw her school change from one characterized by the children of Simmons College's faculty to a school with about half Negro slum children and half whites. All the whites were from blue collar steel mill workers' families except for about forty or fifty children of die-hard Simmons faculty and similar families who still clung to their big old homes on Upper Maple Street. Riverview School used to have faculty turnover of about seven percent each year. But four years ago the annual faculty turnover rate was averaging over thirty percent--about the same as the town's other two inner-city schools. Teachers knew Riverview

as a school with tough children to teach. Miss Burns had stuck with her school, from being the town's best principal directing the showplace elementary school (fifteen years ago) to the situation four years ago in which she was faced with what seemed an almost impossibly wide range of pupil achievement potential, many beginning teachers each year who often could not handle the openly defiant few youngsters in every class, almost daily street fights and other reminders of the volatile neighborhood tensions. Four years ago, Riverview's primary grades reading curriculum was essentially the same program the school had followed for the last twenty years. It was a basal reader program with children heterogeneously grouped in self-contained classrooms at each grade level. The poorest readers in grades three through six went to the special reading teacher who worked mornings at Riverview. The reading teacher used small group instruction emphasizing basic skills work, with daily five minute individual pupil-teacher conferencing. He also had the children reading from high-interest low-vocabulary supplementary readers, each at his own rate.

What to do? After about a year of discussions with key members of her staff, a university consultant, members of the school district central office and some long-time friends who still lived in the community, Miss Burns began to sense that Riverview's basic problem had three major dimensions that she should consider seriously in her planning: first, Riverview's children needed greater opportunity to move ahead at a pace suited to each child's ability and background--carefully slowly paced for some of the recent immigrants from the rural South while intellectually fast paced for some of the children who had the requisite background and ability; second, youngsters needed a school which offered them the kind of stability and predictability in school routines which was sorely lacking in the fast changing neighborhood with its lack of definite standards and attendant tensions and frustrations; and third, Riverview's children needed a school which helped each child to feel that his teachers respected him and thought of him as an individual in his own right. According to the school

counselor (one of Miss Burns' best staff members) this last need was particularly pronounced among the half to two-thirds of the children who lived in slum or near slum home conditions. Especially many of the Negro children, the counselor observed, seemed to need desperately the feeling that their teachers saw in them (the children) a personal basis for worth. She felt that too many of Riverview's Negro children felt a deep down self-deprecation, because of their caste, and therefore a feeling of alienation from the white culture. The counselor jarred a faculty meeting one afternoon with the following quote from Malcolm X: "The worst crime the white man has committed has been to teach us to hate ourselves."

As Miss Burns reflected on the three dimensions, she felt best about the provisions for stability which she had built into the school's routines and procedures. For example, children followed definite rules about such things as orderly movement in the hall, quiet in the lunchroom, and consideration for speakers at assemblies. But, on the other hand, Miss Burns knew that in some classrooms (notably of the new and inexperienced faculty members) teachers had difficulty keeping a stable, relaxed, but orderly environment.

One first-year teacher told of her disappointment because she found herself always fighting to "keep the lid on tight" so that things would not get out of hand. She told of her retreat into too much harshness, authoritarianism, and she suspected, more than a little insensitivity to children. This insensitivity, she felt, grew at least in part from her inability to understand why particular children in her class behaved as they did. It seemed that the lack of being "tuned in" to the children was a particularly significant problem for many teachers in this school where the majority of the children were from a way of life alien in key respects from the middle class upbringing of the teachers.

As a result of these faculty discussions and her other information-gathering and reflections Miss Burns began to develop an idea for the primary grades reading program which, hopefully, would encourage teachers to conference regularly

with individual children, listen to children, and develop two-way "tuned in" dialogue as a pivotal part of the instructional program. The primary grades reading plan she was forming would also be an attempt to help each child move ahead more at his own pace. Perhaps these two emphases would result in more of the needed increase of stability and academic flexibility in classrooms. Thus the basic goal of the new primary grades reading program would be two-fold: 1) teaching children to be on their own in reading as soon as possible--in terms of each child's abilities, 2) facilitating pupil-teacher "tuning in."

The plan resolved itself into two phases, with Phase I, the development period, being started three years ago. Phase I of the plan would concentrate on the relatively uncomplex problem of fitting a "Joplin Plan" scheme around the school's primary basal reading program. This meant that teachers would departmentalize at reading time each morning--each of the four teachers at each primary grade level taking one class which was homogeneously grouped to work at a different level and pace. Children who were most able would be in one group using a self-paced, self-selected component in its reading program from the start of the year; children who were progressing more at an average rate would be grouped into two groups using basal readers and moving toward self-selection and pacing; and finally, those children who needed special literacy or "compensation" teaching would be taught by the grade level's best teacher in one small group not to exceed fifteen pupils. What to do with these poorest readers caused Miss Burns some soul searching and finally a hard decision based on her understanding of the Negro slum child's problems. She realized that the lowest achievement-grouped class would be almost all Negro children but decided to accept this de facto segregation because low low achievers needed a "compensatory education" of the highest sort in order to attempt to reverse the usual progressively deteriorating situation where Negro children steadily lose ground from being a little behind in the first grade, to being more behind in the second grade and so on and on. Miss Burns agreed with the analysis of Charles Silberman who

in Crisis in Black and White called educators to help the Negro child get a good start at all costs:

> It takes no genius for a [Negro] child to know that reading is what school is about in the first few grades. His failure to learn to read, therefore, can only serve to reinforce the negative image he already has of himself because of his color and because of the instability of his background. (1)

During Phase I, the development period, the reading teacher would work with faculty members to help them learn how to build an individualized component into their basal reading program. (The reading teacher would be working full time at Riverview instead of half time. This would be financed by Federal funds.) He would work with teachers to develop skill at diagnosing individual children's reading problems; he would help them practice conferencing with children, learning from tape-recorded playbacks and by observing him give demonstration conferences; in addition he would introduce teachers to the best high-interest low-vocabulary supplementary readers so that books such as the Boxcar Children (2) (2.7 level of reading difficulty) would be included in classroom individualized reading libraries--supplying exciting and compelling reading for children just beginning their self-paced and self-selected work; he would also train teachers to guide children's self-selection of reading materials--thus helping youngsters to pick books which they could read comfortably and enjoy and which, therefore, would offer them the most practice in reinforcing skills learned in the basal reader component of the program. Miss Burns would show some of the teachers how experience charts and individual children's dictation could be a central part of the beginning reading program from kindergarten onward. This language-experience approach (3) emphasis was to be facilitated by more in-classroom easel painting and other forms of expression, along with a stronger beginning spelling and writing program. The librarian from the nearby public library would be called on to introduce children's favorite books. Miss Burns would introduce teachers to the newly established parent-run school library which was being equipped using Federal funds. Parents who were manning the paperback bookstore would be called

on to indroduce new titles at faculty meetings. Also at faculty meetings, key local neighborhood leaders would be asked to speak candidly to the teachers about tenement conditions, structure of street gangs, the school's image and other realities of life on the slum fringe.

Phase I was scheduled to last for three years. During that time the shift to a much more individualized program was to take place gradually. The fourth year (this year, 1967) was to be the first year of Phase II, or the individualized primary grades reading program in final form. To the surprise of all, the plan has remained on schedule. Most teachers have adequate training and the materials and procedures are now organized.

Here is a sketch of Riverview's individualized primary reading program as it exists today: In kindergarten the children are involved in a language-experience program emphasizing extensive chart story work, individual children's dictation of stories, word games, (especially on beginning and ending consonants and other relatively regular phonic elements) and a daily period when children are led to browse (or read, if they can) in picture books of their own selection. During this period the teacher conferences with each child, discussing his reactions to the pictures and the story lines of his favorite book of the moment, which he brings to the conference. At the end of this kindergarten year a list of children who probably are going to have severe difficulty in learning to read is drawn up by the kindergarten teachers with the help of Miss Burns and the reading teacher. These are children who have a syndrome of seriously retarded developmental factors thought to be important to reading success--children who might not seem to "catch on" to the notion that reading is essentially an alphabetically coded system by which talk is written down; who have serious difficulty with auditory or visual discrimination; who might have poor eye-hand coordination; who perhaps score low on the draw-a-man test; who are among the lowest scorers on the two reading readiness tests that are administered; and who are observed to be particularly slow at learning. (A committee of faculty

members is also investigating the de Hirsch series of ten tests that appear to have highly significant predictive value when considering which children now in kindergarten will fail to learn to read by the second grade.) (4)

These Riverview children, who in kindergarten were thought to be headed for difficulty in learning to read, are grouped in a special first grade class. No more than fifteen children are in this class whose curriculum varies according to the kindergarten and subsequent first grade diagnosis of each child's reading problems. Emphasis here is largely on pre-literacy and literacy training, cutting down to a bare minimum even the training in mathematics and excluding formally taught science, social studies, health and, of course, busywork activities. In the literacy class, there is no need for formally scheduled conferences between teacher and pupil because much of the work in the class is on a one-to-one basis. The pupils seem to be thriving in the class's individualized, relaxed, activity-centered program. During the year the group of children in the special literacy class changes according to re-evaluation of all first grade children's reading needs.

The other three first grade classes are heterogeneously grouped. In these groups, the language experience emphasis is continued so that learning to read and write is made as natural as possible for each child. The basal reader and a strong spelling-handwriting program are introduced after January 1. During the first few months of first grade ~~school~~ the kindergarten teaching of initial and final consonants is augmented by teaching of beginning word analysis skill while learning common sight words and more advanced but relatively regular consonant blends and digraphs. After the first of the year this teaching will be continued in the basal reader and spelling-handwriting components of the reading program. Thus the sequential learning of reading, spelling, and handwriting skills begins about January but only after those skills were well introduced in language-experience story dictation and in the games and stimulating word analysis sessions during the first three months of school. After the first of the year

the language-experience periods are continued for about thirty to forty minutes daily; children are encouraged to write more on their own and dictate progressively less. As children seem to be able to read on their own they are introduced to minimum vocabulary books which are displayed around the room. These books are to be read at each child's own pace during the daily book reading time. The kindergarten practice of daily pupil-teacher conferencing during "book time" is continued with a child usually scheduling himself when he has read or looked at a book he wants to discuss. Teachers conference with each child in the class at least once a week for about five to ten minutes.

In grades two and three the language-experience emphasis on dictation has been phased out for all but the children in the special literacy class. In place of dictation, the children are encouraged to write extensively on their own. Along with the writing program, the basal reading program core is continued for about thirty minutes daily, with training in reading mechanics and skills being given most attention. A daily forty-five minute self-selection and self-paced reading component is now well under way in the reading program for the three heterogeneously grouped classes. Children, in those self-paced periods, who need special help with unknown words are grouped around a sixth grader who comes in daily to give word help. Scheduled pupil-teacher conferencing is continued at the same frequency as in the first grade.

For those children who have passed the beginning fifth grade level in reading ability, the teacher's emphasis during conferences has shifted to more advanced concerns such as helping with library research, encouraging critical reading, and extending each youngster's sensitivity and judgment concerning the art and craft of fiction writing. These children particularly are profiting from the twice-each-month trips to the town library. Many of the children's individual study projects were stimulated by the social studies and science curriculum.

But how can Miss Burns keep adequate administrative control with children proceeding at different rates and some working on different individual study

projects? Because of the wider range of reading behavior being stimulated, the school's overall evaluation plan has been changed to what Miss Burns calls a Continuous Feedback on Individual Development scheme in which more extensive-than-usual analysis and evaluation is made of each child's reading strengths and weaknesses along with his developing attitudes toward books and reading. These data are posted in his cumulative file.

PART II: Key Principles and Guidelines

I hope "The Riverview School Story" has provided a primary grades setting which will amplify and make practical the following outline of key individualized reading principles and guidelines. Also, the story was intended to emphasize that individualized reading is not a doctrine as much as an approach with a wide variety of possible school and classroom applications. The approach can be used successfully in suburban as well as inner-city situations, with graded or non-graded, team taught or self contained grouping. Because individualizing means thinking first of the child and his needs and only second of his grade level, the following outline of guidelines will, of necessity, refer to the total range of the elementary school reading curriculum--beginning, as well as advanced activities.

* * * * *

One might say (somewhat presumptuously, I'm sure) that there are but two key principles on which rest all the guidelines for individualized reading instruction. These two interdependent principles are;

I Each child should be helped to be on his own in reading, at the right pace for him and in such a way that he becomes a skillful and responsible independent learner and thinker;

II The teacher and each child should maintain a two-way "tuned-in" instructional relationship emphasizing continuous feedback and dialogue.

I shall attempt to interpret these two principles with ten guidelines. The guidelines are:

(1) We need an overall frame-of-reference within which to plan for each

child's orderly growth toward reading independence. For this we can use the three distinct phases through which most children appear to go as they learn to read independently. These three phases are important to keep in mind as an overview when considering the changing role of the teacher, task of the child, and the content to be learned. First is the Dependent Phase, in which the child is learning the alphabetic-phonetic system, acquiring a basic sight word vocabulary, learning an approach to word analysis, along with learning the mechanics of writing and the rudiments of spelling. We can say that this period extends up to about the 2.1 reading ability level. At this point the youngster is able to read in a wide variety of appealing easy-to-read books (The Cat in the Hat, et al). (5) He is on his own in this limited sense. The second developmental period is called the Early Independent Phase. It stretches from the end of the Dependent Phase (2.1 level) to approximately the 5.1 reading ability level--to the point where the child can read a great many of the books on the children's library shelves. Because, during the Early Independent Phase, the child is reading from a growing number of titles, the teacher's role becomes, to an increasing degree, a guide--encouraging the child to proceed at his right pace, helping him in his self-selection and evaluation of books (including fiction, non-fiction, as well as texts), and teaching him needed skills. The Early Independent Phase is the developmental period during which most children need to be given a great deal of practice reading self-selected books they enjoy and can master comfortably, practice in learning to apply their reading skill more and more automatically. The last developmental period can be labelled the Independent Phase--from about 5.1 reading level upward--where the child is able to read most of the books in the children's library. During this phase of learning to read independently, the child's task shifts from learning the skills of reading fluency to learning to use and enjoy books and reading for reflective intellectual inquiry as well as personal profit. Learning to think reflectively and independently is not easy. It involves learning how to define a question for

inquiry, using a library with facility, thinking logically, perceiving accurately, skill in dialectics, understanding the abstraction process basic to communication, and skill in organizing and reporting.

(2) Especially after the Dependent Phase, each child should be given ample opportunity to select books which he reads for practice in learning the skills more and more automatically. He should be taught to make wise choices and increasingly take responsibility for his own learning.

(3) As a general rule we should aim at shortening the dependency period (Dependent and Early Independent Phases) thereby extending the period when youngsters are learning independently.

(4) Each child should be learning at a pace which best suits his needs.

(5) The classroom and the school should be supplied with an ample number of books. Classroom libraries are particularly valuable during the late Dependent through the Early Independent Phases. Classroom libraries should be well stocked with easy-to-read and high-interest low-vocabulary supplementary readers. School libraries need to aim at a minimum of ten books per child. Paperback bookshops should stock about eight hundred appealing elementary school age titles. Children should be bussed to the local public library at least twice monthly during the Early Independent and Independent Phases.

(6) Classroom instructional reading programs should include provision for one-to-one conferences between pupil and teacher.

(7) In most cases a sequentially ordered skills teaching program should be built into the instructional reading program. This might be done in a self-paced fashion such as the SRA kits provide, or it could be an abbreviated basal reader program (as in the Riverview program) emphasing teaching the mechanics and skills of reading with far less-than-usual group reading of the same stories. We have to assume that a significant amount of the specific reading skill learning will be acquired as children are involved in a language-experience program from kindergarten onward, as they read self-selected books independently, and as they pursue independent study projects during the Independent Phase; therefore the usual sequential skills program can be abbreviated. But, nevertheless,

most teachers need the assistance and materials which a good commercially prepared sequenced program provides. If used judiciously, such a prepared program will free the teacher for one-to-one conferencing which focuses more on the child's reactions to the ideas in his books and less on mechanics teaching. Also, with the existence of a sequenced skill strand in the reading program, teachers can provide some children with more of it--greater structure--if this seems needed, while minimizing other children's participation in the sequenced activities.

(8) The school and classroom environments should facilitate independent thinking. That is, the environment should stimulate questioning, untrammelled thinking, innovative activities, and inner-directed intellectual behavior. The environment at the beginning of the year should be as free as the previous experience and expectations of the children (and the teacher) will allow.

(9) If we succeed in guiding children to take more responsibility for their own learning all children will not be following a set curriculum page by page, unit by unit. Therefore the school's overall assessment and evaluation plan needs to be structured so that it provides a continuous feedback on each child's development, so that it is easily accessible, and so that it is more detailed and sensitive than usual. The major goals of the school need to be spelled out clearly so that evidence and reports, appropriate to each goal, can be collected. This includes the less tangible--such as attitudes toward books and reading--as well as the more tangible aims of reading education.

(10) And, probably most important of all the guidelines, teachers should be well trained in the following four competencies in order to make the strongest possible implementation of an individualized program:

Teachers Must be Able to "Tune In" and Elicit Specific Feedback From Each Child

Listening to children is an art and skill at which many teachers appear to be rusty. Teachers need to listen to themselves tape recorded in one-to-one conferences with child after child. Are they asking the kinds of questions in

which they are genuinely interested and to which they really do not know all the answers? Are questions often provocative and open ended (Why didn't the Incas invent the wheel?)? To what extent is the teacher listening to the child and helping him build and develop his ideas? To what extent is the teacher relaxed enough to let his real feelings and reactions to what the youngster is saying come through? Then, too, to what extent can the teacher understand the child? Has the teacher observed the youngster sensitively in his relaxed moments with his peers? Is the child's community, cultural, and home environment so foreign to the teacher's that the teacher is misreading the signals from the child? (How many of his pupils' homes has the teacher visited in the last few years?)

All of this implies clearly that there is more to "tuning in" than just talking to a child.

Teachers Should be Capable of Giving Clear Feedback to Each Child

How often can we say that a child really understands and is involved in the whys of what he is asked to do at school? How often is he"tuned in"to his teacher's real feelings and perceptions concerning how he is coping at school? Clear feedback given continuously and non-threateningly is basic material for a child's honest self-appraisal. It is necessary if the child is to take responsibility increasingly for his own learning, helping himself through flexible channels that are opened for him by his teachers. This is far more and of a different quality than the usual school reporting system that always notifies children about mistakes but seldom provides a supportive mirror for academic and personal self-directed growth.

Teachers Should be Able to Diagnose Reading Skill Problems and Carry out Their Diagnoses

In an individualized program it is essential that a teacher know how to find a pupil's particular reading strengths and weaknesses and do it in such a manner that these can be communicated to the child in a supportive way. For example teachers need to know how to use informal reading inventories, how to assess

library research and critical reading skills. Teachers also should know of self-teaching materials that can be recommended to children so that they might help themselves.

Teachers Need to Possess a Clear Understanding of How they Might Develop Independent Reflective Thinking in Children

If we are to realize the potential from individualized reading, teachers must be able to articulate a tentative but well ordered frame-of-reference concerning the major elements involved in training for reflective thinking and how those elements interrelate. In addition to explaining a model, teachers should be able to explain how they might teach children to master these elements. For example, a sixth grade teacher should be able to explain clearly how he might teach children to pursue library inquiry with relish, to ferret out the implicit premises and assumptions in an argument, to perceive and evaluate complex social problem situations as accurately as possible, to evaluate value statements in terms of their abstraction levels, to discuss reflectively the meaning of a book of substance, and ~~how~~ to develop a penetrating sensitivity to the art and craft of fiction writing.

In Conclusion--

The task of building an elementary education to develop responsible independence and the ability to think for oneself is a broad aim toward which the individualized reading program's contribution is perhaps the most crucial. I hope that this paper has clarified the problem a bit and suggested practical next moves for those who are serious about realizing this goal.

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